

2 Easter – B

Acts 4:32-35

1 John 1:1-2:2

John 20:19-31

The text comes from the gospel: “*Then Jesus said to Thomas, ‘Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt, but believe.’ Thomas answered him, ‘My Lord and my God!’*”

Let me just come right out and confess it: every week before I sit down to write the sermon I go back into my filing cabinet of old sermons and I go hunting to see if there is one I can re-use. After all, I served one parish for ten years, but I’ve been ordained for over twenty and have served several congregations. Surely there are sermons I’ve written that have only been heard by one congregation and what would be the harm in simply re-purposing it for another?

And there have been times when this plan has worked. But let me stress—with some measure of both disappointment *and* irritation—that most of the time this plan does not work. At *all*. And yet each week I spend the first part of sermon-writing time going through old sermons and hoping to find one I can re-use. Because even though I’m a writer by trade and vocation and even though I love to do write and even though I’m a preacher by trade and vocation and I take this work very seriously, writing is very, very hard work. It’s harder than doing abdominal crunches, which I also avoid doing. Of course, if I show up on Sunday morning not having done my abdominal crunches, you wouldn’t know the difference. But if I show up without a sermon, well, you know: that would be *bad*.

Still, having said that, when it comes to the second Sunday of Easter, I just always want to talk about Thomas, my second favorite disciples. (My first favorite is Mary Magdalene, even though we don’t think of her as a disciple, but since she was the first witness to the resurrection, she’s a disciple in my book.)

The truth is, I love Thomas. And though this is, in fact, not a re-cycled sermon, I *am* recycling some of my thought and emotions about Thomas. Because I think he has been sorely and inaccurately excoriated as “the doubting Thomas.” And because I think he is a very relevant disciple for the likes of us twenty and twenty-first century folks.

Keep in mind that I spent ten years serving a congregation in Schenectady where most of the people either worked or had worked at the GE Research and Development Center. In other words, I served a congregation full of *engineers*. They were inclined to want *proof* about everything. Replace the roof? Let’s get fifteen, twenty and thirty-year performance charts on roofing materials. Become the first Reconciling in Christ congregation in the Upstate New York Synod? Let’s research scientific, sociological and medical data on the etiology of sexual orientations. Imagine them as Thomas: Trust the word of your friends that Jesus is risen and has been hanging out with you? Oh, they’d have wanted to see the marks of the nails. They have wanted to put their hands in those sorry wounds.

And you know what? I love that kind of thorough-going insistence on reality. And I respect the honesty—the honesty and the bravery—of doubt. We shouldn’t make “doubting” a pejorative adjective. Because if we don’t have our doubts about things, then we’re just not paying attention. And if we’re not, at least from time to time, having some anguished thoughts about the meaning of life and where God figures into it, then we’re not using the blessed brains God gave us.

I mean, let's go back to Thomas just for a few minutes. I love this disciple or his passion and stubbornness. I love him for his conviction. I believe that if Thomas wanted to understand what he was doing in following Jesus, then he had to ask questions or his ministry wouldn't have meant much at all. And that's one important way in which Thomas can help us. Because an unquestioning kind of faith is not a very active one. Or, as the theologian Paul Tillich put it once, the opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty.

And why shouldn't have Thomas had his doubts? He was one of the most passionate and vocal of the disciples. Do you remember how, in John's gospel, Jesus learns that Lazarus has died? Jesus decides that he wants to go to the family in Bethany. He wants to be with them. But the disciples discourage him; the journey to get there was through dangerous territory and after all, people had recently tried to stone him. He should play it safe. Stay put. But it is Thomas, then, who shows the greatest devotion to Jesus' ministry. Disregarding his own safety, he says of the journey, "Let us go also, that we may die there with him."

Then later, when Jesus is having his last supper with the disciples, he tells them that he is going to his Father's house and that the disciples know the way he is going. But Thomas is not content with metaphors or ambiguity. He presses Jesus for concrete details about the journey in faith. "We do *not* know the way you are going. How *can* we know the way?" he asks. You can hear the urgency in those sentences, can't you? He wants Jesus to be a kind of cartographer of faith. And don't we want the same thing? *Tell us what it all means*, God is often the urgent prayer of our hearts, isn't it?

Of course, some biblical commentators have said this is proof that Thomas is a dim-bulb when it comes to having faith, as if Thomas somehow *should* have known all about the mystery of the God we worship. But how could he? How much is fair to expect from a human disciple? After all, where were the other disciples at the end? Where did any of them go, except maybe *away*—out of fear, out of confusion, out of the knowledge that there was nothing that any of them could have done to save him and so they had best try to save their own skins. Peter denies Jesus three times. Thomas, who said he would die with Jesus, does no such thing. The disciples flee.

All except for Jesus' mother, a few women and his one beloved disciple were even around to view his crucifixion. So Thomas is not really worse than anybody else for talking a bigger game than he was able to play.

And when news of the resurrection gets out, Thomas doesn't believe it. But neither did the other disciples when Mary tells them about it. According to Luke's gospel, when she tells the brothers in the faith of the resurrection, they don't believe her. The text says, "these words seemed to them an idle tale and they did not believe them." I leave it for you to decide if Mary's gender had anything to do with why they didn't believe her so-called "idle tale."

After having seen the abuse heaped on Jesus, having seen the crucifixion, Thomas doesn't want to open himself up to the potential for further hurt in the form of raised hopes, then dashed expectations. He doesn't want to be anybody's *fool*, believing "idle tales." He wants to be Jesus' trusted *disciple*, doing ministry face-to-face and on the frontlines, the way he knows how to do it.

Thomas' concern for seeing, for touching the wounds of Jesus is consistent with his views of ministry—direct and hands-on; he is driven to make the ministry and message of Jesus real. He wanted proof that Jesus was resurrected after he had witnessed Jesus' arrest and beating, after knowing that he had been brutally crucified. Resurrection made no sense to him. Not after all that.

And is that so awful? I mean, maybe we can say that Thomas did have a moment of doubt, that it was glitch in his character not to believe the witness of his trusted friends. Maybe we *can* go so far as to say that Thomas was a doubter, maybe even slow on the uptake, certainly stubborn. And yes, of course, there does appear to be a tone of reproach in Jesus' words—or

maybe the reproach comes from the writer of the gospel of John “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” But Jesus always has expected hard things from his followers: *Turn the other cheek, love your enemies, do not judge, do not be a hypocrite, do not worry.* And that’s just from one of his sermons!

Nevertheless, when Thomas finally does put his hands in Christ’s wounds, he says what none of the other disciples have yet said. Thomas takes the peace that Jesus gives to him and turns it into a remarkable confession of his own resurrected faith: “My God and my Lord.”

Thank God, thank God abundantly for the story of Thomas who gives us a chance to see for ourselves that those who don’t believe, those who can’t let themselves believe for fear of being somebody’s fool, may yet be made to be God’s disciple with a pure and strong faith. Thank God for Thomas who is not anybody’s fool, but God’s new creation: the disciple transformed by faith to see the still unseen Godhead in the rise Jesus Christ.

It is Easter, after all, and God calls non-being into being, doubt into faith, our despair into the richest joy. It is Easter, after all, and God is still speaking, turning each of us—right now!—into a new creation, a creation of faith. Perhaps we can speak it even now, perhaps this moment we can breathe with pure delight the words of freedom and the words of glory: “Christ is risen! My Lord and my God, you are risen indeed!”

Amen.

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